

Questioning Gender Through the Study of English in Japan

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< keywords >

classroom discourse analysis, cross-cultural communication, English education in Japan, feminist pedagogy, gender and the family, mother/daughter relationships, social identities

< ABSTRACT >

This study offers an “insider's view” of the role of feminist ideas in the discourse of a communicative English language classroom created and managed by Japanese and Japan-born Korean adult women. In this class, participants can hone their English discussion skills while learning about feminism and women's studies from a cross-cultural perspective. The class employs native English-speaking facilitators on a rotating basis, one of whom is the author.

The discourse in a one-hour class session is transcribed and analysed by drawing on ideas from interactional sociolinguistics, classroom discourse analysis, and feminist pedagogy and consciousness-raising. The analysis is augmented by participant journals, questionnaires, interviews, and comments on drafts of this article.

Participants gradually grow involved in the discussion through the process of critically examining and suggesting strategies for dealing with the societal pressure to marry and bear children conveyed to them through their mothers. Personal narratives dominate, and within them, there is a high degree of emotional expression and personal disclosure. These discourse strategies emphasize the solidarity of the participants as females and assert the authenticity of their own lived experiences against the “common sense” of patriarchal society. Ideas from feminist philosophy and pedagogy are also echoed in many of the participants' as well as the facilitator's utterances and these shared feminist paradigms assist them in correctly interpreting each other's intentions.

While not suggesting that feminist discourse is necessarily enhanced by or dependent upon the use of English, this study does clarify how and why a feminist approach to language teaching and learning may motivate and support female language learners, at least those in the age group most strongly impacted by changes in gender roles and the family.

Introduction

The social impact of women's solidarity, accomplished through the medium of “women's talk” or discourse, is

seldom acknowledged in discussions of gender roles and the family. A *Daily Yomiuri* article (Dec. 30, 1997), for example, proclaims, “Japan's divorce rate rising as age-old taboos fall

American English⁴.

These English-speaking women act as English cultural and linguistic resources and discussion facilitators rather than as traditional instructors. That is, the participants and coordinators generate or suggest many of the class topics and activities, and rather than formally teaching English language skills, the facilitators assist participants in their English self-expression or comprehension of English materials as needed.

I am the facilitator of the particular class analyzed here. Participants know me as in my thirties, White, American, a full-time university instructor, mother, Japanese speaker, feminist, and partner of a Japanese man. I had met the curriculum coordinator in a feminist group about 15 years previously in Tokyo, and ran into her again at various events when I moved back to Japan in 1992. I was interested in helping with the Colors of English class because of my desire to apply feminist pedagogy to the teaching of English as a foreign language in my university classes; this class gives me an ideal environment in which to try out new ideas. I keep offering to help facilitate the class because of the wonderful women I meet there. In these senses, my motivation is similar to the participants as it is both academic and personal.

As mentioned above, the facilitators usually decide the topics of their classes in consultation with the curriculum coordinator. A selective review of audio tapes of 25 class sessions indicates that the following main themes have been treated in the class: ethnic identities, female identities, feminism, life choices, discrimination in employment, struggles with learning English, English (linguistic) imperialism, self-expression through discussion and free writing, personal histories, personal philosophies, relaxation and healing.

4. The participants

In the class analyzed here, there are seven participants (including the two coordinators). Here is a brief overview of the relevant points of their identities, as presented in questionnaire responses and in the class discussion:

Participant 1: In her mid-forties, Japanese, married, homemaker, mother; first studied feminism in this class

Participant 2: In her early thirties, Japan-born Korean, single, full-time worker, lives alone, grew up bilingual in Korean and Japanese;

attended university and encountered feminism in an English-speaking country

Participant 3: In her twenties, Japanese, single, full-time worker, lives alone; first studied feminism in this class

Participant 4: In her early forties, Japanese, single, full-time worker, lives with parents; is taking a Women's Studies course at a Japanese university

Participant 5: In her early thirties, Japanese, single, free-lance writer and editor, lives with parents; is participating in a Women's Studies study group near her home

Participant 6: In her mid-forties, class coordinator, Japanese, married, full-time worker, mother; has been deeply involved in the study of feminism counseling and feminist educational theories for the past ten years

Participant 7: In her mid-forties, class coordinator, Japan-born Korean, single, full-time worker, lives with mother; grew up monolingual in Japanese, attended university and studied Women's Studies in an English-speaking country, has been a long-time feminist activist in Japan

As for their motivations for taking the class, in their journal entries⁵, class participants echo the course flier's premise of "English + feminism + self-expression = personal empowerment." A typical entry reads:

"My weak point is to do self-expression, but this class'es teacher'es are very powerful so I can get a lot of energy. I think this class is very different with another English class. Another English class'es are only English but this class is not. We can learn a lot of things- Feminist pedagogy, other people's idea, to express ourselves and so on."

The participants also combine English with feminist study and discussion because this meets a variety of personal and

participants, the values and traditions of Japanese culture, and feminism – especially the theories and traditions of feminist consciousness-raising and feminist pedagogy as in the work of hooks (1994), Weiler (1994), and Vandricks (1994, 1995). In the case of feminist English classroom discourse analysis, then, I am singling out feminism itself as a kind of evolving culture shared by Japan-born participants and foreign-born facilitators, which helps them negotiate the meaning of utterances and build a coherent participation framework.

In addition, the emerging work on classroom discourse analysis by van Lier (1988) and Fairclough (1989, 1992) provides some basis for comparing the turn-taking structure and facilitator-participant roles in the Colors of English class to more formal classrooms as well as to unstructured conversation.

The transcription method used is adapted from Schiffrin (1994). Participants are referred to as “P” and myself (the facilitator) as “F.”

Analysis

1. Personal experience as a source of authority

As noted by Schiffrin (1996), the topic of mother/daughter relationships, with their tension and ambivalence, tends to elicit a wealth of personal stories or narratives from women focusing on different expectations and obligations between their own and their mothers' or daughters' generations, and this is indeed what ensued in the class. The first participant (P1) sets the stage for the discussion by aligning herself with the mother in the bell hooks passage. P1 questions the reading not by referring to established theories or authorities, but on the basis of her own personal experiences and feelings. According to Weiler (1994), this reliance on lived rather than learned truths has been a guiding principle of feminist consciousness-raising.

In the passage, we only hear the author's interpretation of her mother; the mother is accused with no opportunity to respond. P1, speaking as a mother herself, voices a desire to protect her daughters:

P1: For me, after reading this book, I was a little shocked, because I remembered about me and my daughter, not like not the relationship between and my mother, I remembered me and my daughter.

And um...then my daughter is hurt, I want to protect-protect her if something happened I wanted to protect her, but this sentence, “She's hurting me,”

If I'm hurting my daughter, I'm hurting them, I didn't know the fact, it's very miserable situation for me, so I wanted to ask *them* I'm hurting you? but I couldn't do it...

She challenges the other participants to let their mothers know their true feelings by reframing the problem so that daughters bear at least part of the burden of responsibility for this breakdown in communication:

P1: Many- at many other family, mother wants to talk her children but children don't want.
so their reply is just “*sou*” or “*betsu ni*” -ah “*betsu ni*” is a common expression- “*betsu ni*” - “*betsu ni*” means they don't want to say about anything-

I attempt here to bring her back to her personal experience with her own daughters rather than speaking about Japanese society in general:

F: You mentioned about not wanting to know about what your daughters think or being afraid to ask them?

P1: Even I ask them they don't say real thinking, maybe they say “oh you're a great mother, oh I like you very much.”

Ps: ((laughter))

P1: To keep our relationship good, it's a good way they know, and I also say them, to them, “oh you're a good [child for me] =

Ps: (((laughter)))

P1: =but it's a part real, it's real, but um..further- further talking, more talking, maybe now it's a little difficult thing..

She says she is willing to listen, but no one gives her any honest answers. She is not going to be put off with “*betsu ni*,” or “it's nothing.”

2. Emotions as a source of knowledge

The next three participants respond to P1 also from their personal experiences as daughters, explaining how they are silenced or empowered to speak to their mothers and why. In doing so, they seem to illustrate the psychological struggle of a daughter for an authentic self without sacrificing a close and nurturing relationship with her mother (Westcott, 1997). The second participant (P2) testifies that because she wants different things than her mother does, her mother feels she is betraying their shared gender and ethnic identities:

P2: Well, I read this over and over because – because I – I felt sympathy to this author.

but my mind is-my mind don't want to do that,
 so and uh but um, nobody argued about that in my family,
 so and um, probably my mother is double standard,
 she understands uh um.. my father do something all himself,
 but uh she never says about that,
 and uh, um, I don't know so,
before I wanted to um, rebuilt a family relationship
 but, now I *give up* yes=

Ps: ((laughter))

This giving up, though, is not a passive action; instead, she makes a remarkable declaration; that she intends to create a new type of family that is not based on marriage:

P4: =give up maybe, so probably I should to make my family so even *own self*, single is probably I can say a *family*, yes=

She has been a devoted daughter and has lived with her parents past the age of forty. In Japan, adult children have traditionally lived with their parents until they marry, the eldest son remaining even after marriage. For daughters especially, to live alone away from the family's supervision still risks sullyng their sexual reputations and lowering their chances of being selected as a "good," i.e., malleable and sexually inexperienced bride in the future. In addition, as parents grow older, it is a source of comfort to have a child living with them to help out. Although traditionally this duty was the eldest son's job, with fewer children being born, this now falls upon daughters as well.

Creating her own family as a single woman would therefore seem to open up both herself and her mother to societal criticism and feelings of shame, not to mention abandonment. In the coda of her narrative, however, she resolves this by glossing her action as a positive example for her mother. What seemed initially a rejection of her mother can thus be redefined as nurturing behavior, because her own self-acceptance and acting in accordance with her own desires may actually lead the way to a more authentic life for her mother also. I try to bring her back to the present situation with her parents:

F: Are you living with your parents now?

P4: ((Nods)) =so I hope my mother lives own her life.

Ps: Mmm.

F: "Own her life" means away from your father? Away from you?

P4: [Both.

Ps: (((laughter)))

P4: Yeah so and um she thinks about uh par-fathers or me, she never thinks about own self, and uh, I think she should think about her self, own self, and uh to make friends more or something to find a hobby, and if she wants to divorce it's *okay* yes. yeah.

In white American culture, we value "talking things out" face to face with someone when we are having trouble with a relationship. My next question seems to imply that this is what she should do:

F: Have you ever talked to her about that?

P4: Mm hm, yes, I [recommend=

Ps: (((laughter)))

P4: =to her about divorce.

She answered, "if I win the [lottery] =

Ps: (((laughter)))

P4: =she will...

P4 had stated earlier that she is still in the child's position in her family. Here, however, she seems to be reversing roles by advising her mother on divorce. In fact, there has been a surge in Japan of young women choosing to remain single and older women initiating divorces (Tanaka, 1995; Yoshizumi, 1995). P4's reports of her conversations with her mother seem to link these two phenomena together in a way statistics cannot.

3. Personal narrative as a form of self-disclosure

All of the participants so far have used autobiography, or personal narrative, to persuasively argue their positions on the class topic. Personal narrative may dominate in feminist discourse for many reasons: it asserts the authenticity of one's own lived experience against, in this case, the "common sense" of patriarchal society (hooks, 1994; Rosen, 1988); it creates rapport and thus fosters female solidarity (Tannen, 1988); it is face-saving in the case of disagreement, as it offers an embedded account of why one's opinions may differ from another's, again maintaining social solidarity (Schiffrin, 1994).

The next participant (P5) now uses personal narrative to dramatize a current conflict with her mother:

be a distinguishing characteristic of a feminist classroom: in both classes I observed at a completely unrelated feminist English site, in which a Japanese woman was the facilitator, a similar instance of self-disclosure occurred at a similar point in the class (McMahill, 1997).

Although she is speaking in her second language, P5 instinctively uses various effective rhetorical devices for narrating the conflict with her mother. One is repetition: e.g. “I had a very very very tough time.” Another is parallel structure, which she emphasizes even further through her stress of the word “couldn’t”: e.g., “I *couldn’t* stop crying and I *couldn’t* leave the house and I—I just left home, and I *couldn’t* come I, back to home until 11 or 12 in the night (laugh), and yesterday in the night I was just—I *couldn’t* stop crying...” A third is the use of dialogue or reported speech, as in “grandchildren are really cute or so sweet or you have to see your own grandchild.” Finally, her extensive details create a vivid image of the conflict, while her tears and laughter clue us in to its emotional tone (Tannen, 1989).

The result is that a vital connection has now been forged between the reading and the reality of the participants; in a sense, at this point the participants have succeeded in recontextualizing the reading and the topic of mother/daughter conflict and using them as tools for dissecting current conflicts.

4. Moving from victim to survivor

At this point, there is also, significantly, a shift in the turn-taking structure. We had been moving around the circle in a formal and constrained structure in which the facilitator opened and closed each person's turn and selected the next speaker. The immediacy of P5's problem, however, redefines the constraints of the classroom discourse rules so that participants can engage in genuine discussion, i.e., self-select their turn and build freely on each other's remarks without the facilitator necessarily intervening (van Lier, 1988).

P5's problem is also reframed in ideological rather than subjective terms. This can be seen to occur in two ways: one is through a shifting of the reference terms of the conversation away from P5 and her mother to “a woman,” “women,” and so on. Another is through indirect criticism of P5's mother's behavior by applying the feminist concept of “internalized sexism,” in this case how women themselves oppress other women:

P4: But sometimes a woman give – give a like that pressure to

woman, women, yeah. And colleagues uh who worked at the same office before so sometimes, uh, come – comes to office I work, so and they very show off their life, that “I have good babies and good life,” or “You still work same position” or like that – yeah, it's a big pressure.

Notice how women in general, rather than P5's mother in particular, are accused of oppressing other women. This ideological construction of marriage and childbearing as natural, beneficial, and proper for all women is then countered in the class by a critical view of the family as a patriarchal institution which replicates itself by the legal and economic control of women, their sexuality, and their offspring (Taylor, 1995). I use my different (non-native Japanese speaking) ethnic identity to bring this into the discussion by eliciting information on Japanese culture from one of the coordinators:

P7: It — often it's related to the woman's reproductive capability, it's also, after a certain age the woman is no longer on the marriage market.

F: But during that time people are like you know, “It's not your womb, it's society's womb! You have to use it to reproduce!”

P7: I think when people talk about marriage it's not relation to man and woman, it's a family, so marriage is implies the woman supposed to have a baby, supposed to have a family, so the pressure is as far as the womb is capable of reproducing.

F: So marriage is a kind of code word, or a kind of symbol, an indirect way to say, “reproduce”?

P7: Yes.

In feminist consciousness-raising, women also support each other in getting in touch with their repressed anger and refusing to be victims.⁷ P2 does this indirectly on P5's behalf by testifying that the pressure to marry is unfair gender-linked suffering, moving the tone of the class emotionally from hurt to outrage:

P2: In these days, men – men don't get such a pressure to get married compared to women ‘cause they /?/ – I wonder why women have to have suffer such pressure even now because I think a single life is...

One of my coworkers, she's in – she's in forties, and she married but she said that she had to marry, so she married, but she said if she- if she were in twenty or thirty in now, she said, “I don't marry ‘cause I can live by myself” but at that time she couldn't.

But I agree with her, but why I have to suffer this kind of pressure

from her mother. Participants defused the potential face-threatening aspects of the discussion by expressing their opinions obliquely through personal narratives, by directing their criticism not at individuals but at Japanese social structures, such as *seken* or concern for the opinions of family members and neighbors, and by using the pretext of having to explain their culture to the facilitator.

Subsequent to the class described here, the class coordinators also decided to translate the source of the passage we discussed, the book *Bone black: Memories of girlhood* (hooks, 1996), into Japanese over the coming year as a class project. By helping to disseminate feminist ideas which they have found useful to the wider Japanese society, the participants hope to change that society into one in which they experience less conflict and pressure with their current identities. The class is thus reaffirmed as an alternative community in which members can seek joint societal solutions for shared gender conflicts (Taylor, 1995).

While their discourse sheds light on the process of social change underlying official statistics on gender and the family in Japan, it also hints at other questions about the relationship between language and social identity, particularly the English language and female identity. Specifically, what effect did speaking in English have on the discourse in this class?

While beyond the formal scope of this paper, in a follow-up session I asked the participants their opinions on this question. All of those present answered that when speaking English, they took on a new linguistic identity. Some of the participants insisted that as a result, they actually expressed themselves less stereotypically and more honestly, directly, and assertively in English than in Japanese (see Abe, 1995). One example they gave was the insertion of subjects such as “I” or “you.” They felt that the fact that subjects of sentences must be specified in English constantly drew their attention to the distinctions between their own opinions and those of their interlocutors and helped them to clarify their own positions in discourse, as opposed to the possible role omitting subjects plays in mitigating interpersonal conflict in Japanese.

It is not the intention of this article to argue for the merits of English versus Japanese as a tool for feminist discourse. What is important in terms of English education is the strong intrinsic motivation these perceptions of English provide for communicating in English. Further, while the majority of Japanese feminists may not speak or need English, it bears repeating that these particular participants are clearly

interested in building a cross-cultural feminist consciousness and community, and they feel that English is a useful tool in doing so.

On the other hand, some participants admitted that using English may hinder communication as well. A hierarchical participation structure can result, with less proficient members unable to contribute regardless of their desire to speak. As one questionnaire respondent noted: “It is extremely difficult ...to elaborate the issues due to a big gap of language competence between students.” Some participants may therefore be forced to speak more plainly, simply because they are *unable* to express themselves in English with the subtlety of a native speaker.

However, it may be this very struggle to overcome their reticence about expressing themselves in their less proficient language that leads the Colors of English participants to believe that English demands greater self-assertion and directness. In this sense the same benefit could be achieved of course through communication in any second language, not only English, and in fact many of the participants have studied and speak other foreign languages as well.

The impact of the facilitator on the classroom discourse is also problematic. My cultural and linguistic “otherness” can be seen as motivating participants to articulate and explain their lives and their culture in English to an outsider. My reactions to behavior that would not be acceptable in my own culture, such as the beautician's critical comments, may have encouraged participants to vent their ire about such social pressure. At the same time, I share gender identities as a mother, daughter, and wife in a Japanese family and Japanese cultural context with the participants that may enhance our rapport (Grumet, 1994).

The fact remains, however, that I can be observed throughout the class transcript prompting participants, supplying words for them, or finishing their sentences, or in linguistic terms “formulating” their utterances. Looking back, I think I was trying to assist them out of my experience and authority as a teacher, as well as trying to express my solidarity with them as women. It may still be true, however, that my doing so skewed the outcome, and that my tendency to formulate reflected my privileged position as a native English – speaking Westerner in that particular context (Fairclough, 1989).

Even the text used as the basis for the discussion may have taken on a kind of authority in the class due to my choosing it and by implication approving it as an American feminist.

Matters.

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While such contradictions between the authority of the teacher and text and the autonomy of students have been commented on widely in feminist pedagogy (Morgan, 1996), they may be even further exaggerated in the power dynamics between native-speaking facilitators and non-native speaking participants.

For all these reasons, it is therefore important to complement the above anecdotal data and confirm the findings of this study. A comparative discourse analysis of the same participants speaking on the same topic in both English and Japanese, with facilitators of various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, would add to the little natural data available on discourse in all-female, second-language classrooms. While such research may not provide a simple, uniform formula for educators to imitate, at least it may provide suggestions for creating a classroom community that supports the self-expression of women both in content and style.

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Acknowledgments

Many thanks to the members of the Colors of English class for their cooperation with this paper. Special thanks to Hwa-Mi Park and Kyoko Inamura for their careful reading of and

comments on each draft.

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Notes

¹I use the terms “Japanese-speaking” and “Japan-born” rather than “Japanese” throughout this paper to acknowledge the diverse nationalities and ethnic backgrounds of women studying English in Japan.

²English translation: “We — joining education with our lives.”

³Throughout this paper, the participants' spoken and written English has not been corrected.

⁴The curriculum coordinator notes that this has been a matter of facilitator availability.

⁵For the first three months of the class, participants were asked to keep a weekly journal in English and copy and share it with each other.

⁶This writer has chosen not to capitalize her name.

⁷A classic example of this is the line in the novel *Surfacing* by Margaret Atwood: “This above all, to refuse to be a victim” (quoted in Greene, 1994, p. 23).

or the relationship with man...

However, as one source of social validation is lost, participants can be reassured by the friendships they form in the class that a new one is taking its place. The two coordinators also play an important role in reassuring the participants that they are not alone. P6 does this based on her experience as a professional counselor:

P6: I've heard so many similar stories from my clients, and my friends...

The other coordinator, P7, further redeems P5's personal pain by likening it to an archetypal experience of growing up female and aware, a sort of psychic price that every woman has to "pay" for freedom. She thus brings the class full circle to the bell hooks reading again:

P7: and so just hearing you, P5, I just want to say one thing,
bell hooks – she can see the things you just suffered,
because you can see, it's like a screen, the movie,
once you see the structure, you are not *in* it, you are like a
audience...

see um – she – she talks about the pain a lot, because she is so
smart she can see everything and she- she knows she's different
from other kids,

but and because of the pain that's a kind of *price* she has to *pay* for
the freedom, so after the pain, she can get the freedom,
so that's why her book is so – um – give you – why her book
becomes important is that, it's *painful*,

but that's the process you have to go through in order to get – to
reach freedom, liberty...

At this point, it was time to end the class, so there is no recorded response to this statement. It seems important to note here that the source of P7's deep insight into the pain of growing up "different" is clearly complex and involves not only her gender, but her Korean and working – class identities as well.

Discussion and conclusion

This study of the discourse in an all-female feminist English class revealed the facilitator and participants struggling to construct a cross-cultural, feminist analysis of mother-daughter conflicts. Specifically, we moved from discussing the memoir of a black American writer to supporting one participant in her choice to remain single despite pressure

P7: was never married

F: or married three times

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P5: Um actually in a few days, I had a very very very tough time, and so, when I think of that I start to cry, so please don't look at me.

Ps: ((laughter))

P5: And um it was I think it was on Wednesday.

I and mother was talking about nothing, just stupid things,

then I – I don't remember, but the topic was just slid- slid on marriage, and uh uh she she suddenly talked about her friend--um actually "biyooiin- biyooiin no sense" - "ano" - she's her friend-she talked to her that -" she" means the woman – excuse me how you |say=

F: [the
beautician?

P5: =the
beautician knows me very much too, and the beautician told my mother that uh um, that uh, "I can't believe about the parents and you because-"
((laughter)) ((starts crying))...

P5 is relating here a case of "reported criticism" in which her mother, rather than criticizing her directly, reports the neighborhood beautician's criticism of her as a mother because P5, who is over thirty, has not married and produced children. Because in my own culture, it would be very unusual and impolite for a neighbor to pass judgment on my marital status, in a somewhat shocked tone I try to get her to spell her neighbor's expectations out for me:

F: [What are you supposed to be doing according to the beautician?
What should you be doing?

P5: Maybe marriage, and that's all, I think.

According to Tannen (1989, p. 105), such reported criticism is very damaging: "...opinions expressed in one's absence seem to have an enhanced reality, the incontestable truth of the overheard," and P5's reaction seems to bear this out:

P5: then I *couldn't* stop crying and I *couldn't* leave the house and I—I just left home, and I *couldn't* come I, back to home until 11 or 12 in the night ((laugh)), and yesterday in the night I was just – I *couldn't* stop crying still, and I – I don't know how to sleep.

However, in contrast to Tannen's observation that Americans typically direct their anger in response to reported criticism toward the quoted source rather than the speaker who conveys it (1989, p. 105), P5 seems to conclude that the reported criticism was a strategy her mother utilized to pressure her daughter to marry:

P5: So I just talked to my mother, "if I am married, is it satisfied to

you, *only* if I am married," and she said "yes" because, 'cause she- my- her emotion was very hot at that time-

I know that she doesn't think so,

but it's part of true she hopes that I get married before now from now or anytime,

she worries about my situation very much.

P5, pressed to analyze her mother's expectations more closely, indicates that women's happiness is dependent not only on having children, but on having grandchildren. One of a daughter's obligations is therefore to supply her and her husband's parents with these grandchildren; likewise, one of a mother's obligations is to raise a daughter to do so. P5's failure to marry and reproduce therefore violates not only her obligations to her mother, i.e., makes her a bad daughter, but makes her mother look as though she has failed in her obligations as a mother, i.e., been a bad mother. This mechanism illustrates how the obligations and expectations of women's gender roles are reproduced from generation to generation:

P5: and I thought she was on my side, but yeah but when I was over thirty years old the situation is- has been changing,

F: She's starting to think [maybe it's gone too far?

P5: [Yes. [Yes um.

I urge her to identify the reasons why her mother's attitude has been changing:

F: She's starting- she feels pressure too sometimes-

P5: Yes, she feels pressure too because all of most of her friends has babies now, and she was talked by them their friends like=

F: Grandchildren!

P5: = "grandchildren are really cute or so sweet or you have to see your own grandchild and I – I understand what she thinks, it's very difficult for me.

Here I am anticipating her next word, finishing her sentence for her, not as an outsider but out of a sense of solidarity with her due to my personal experience with my Japanese in-laws.

To share such a personal problem in class is very rare in Japanese culture. The fact that it occurs here is a testimony to the class as a community and a safe place where participants can share their real feelings and problems. It may, however,

And um, I think I'm always fighting with my mother because, I don't know the real reason but what I want what I want to do or what I want something is always totally different from my mother's, and always my mother says I'm – I'm doing it only only for you=

Ps: Ah!

P2: =that's very a kind of burden for me.

I try here to summarize and clarify her explanation by supplying the English term “sacrifice,” although this term expresses my concern that her mother is perhaps going too far:

F: Like she's sacrificing herself for you?

P2: Yeah, and what's more also I thought, I'm a Korean and she's a Korean woman, and in this sentence, “she always torn,” she's always very torn, so I felt guilty being as a kind of “bad girl” to her.

Of course bell hooks is writing from her experience not only as female but as a member of a minority group in American society. It is noteworthy here that only P2, as a Japan-born Korean, calls attention to the importance of racial or ethnic oppression in understanding the guilt toward the mother implicit in the reading text. In this sense, she is not just unburdening herself emotionally, but is offering important clues to unraveling the complexities of her relationship with her mother; in other words, feelings are not “just feelings” with no place in “rational” discussion (Weiler, 1994)

Moving on, one of P2's mother's official duties as a mother appears to be silencing her; speaking out was dangerous because it risked her father's wrath:

P2: And also I reminded me of the relationship between my mother and my father.

She didn't want him get angry – got angry with children, and always said that, please calm down to me, not to my father, you should not say that word, before I – before saying, you should not say that word because /?/

As facilitator, I again attempt to summarize and clarify what she is trying to say:

F: It was like her responsibility to keep you from making your father angry?

P2: Yeah, so...

The third participant (P3) juxtaposes with P2's experience her and her mother's struggles to come to terms with their differences in the face of their great intimacy and identification:

P3: =I always talk about many things, I – we talk about many things the neighborhood or job or family.

My mother is similar to me, [“sokkuri” =

Ps: ((laughter))

P3: and my character and face and talk are the *same*, like *twin*.

Ps: ((Laughter))

At one point, their sisterhood became strained when she did not follow her mother's advice and it became clear that she would not make the same choices her mother had. They were able to come to terms with their differences, however, and repair their relationship. This was thanks to her mother's decision to not pressure her and her sister about marrying, and to find other sources of social approbation. Notice also that P3 thus introduces the topic of societal pressure to marry conveyed by the mother, which other participants then build upon:

P3: Um..I have uh I have elder sister, two women don't get married yet, but she uh my mother worry about anything, but she uh decide this problem is personal, ah, oh so my mother enjoy her life,

and I'm single, it's *MY* responsibility, not parents' job.

She maybe she wait,

but now it's independent each other.

The next participant (P4) offers up a counter-example of a daughter's decision to try and improve her relationship with her mother. She intends to separate herself from her mother and her mother's marriage to her father even if her mother will not:

P4: =I don't want to live with my parents anymore=

Ps: ((laughter))

P4: =and because, my, I, I don't like my father, because very my father is typical Japanese father

Ps: ((laughter))

P4: = and very, and he thinks about only of himself,

and my mother always obeys my father,

and so it's not very – it's not so problem in my family,

but um the anytime anytime my mother obeys my father,

and I'm I'm so um irritate,

so in that time I helped my father,

professional needs and interests at once. As one participant stressed in a questionnaire response,

“One of the most important things about me is just being myself. I want others to know my true intentions. Because since I was little, I always make a distinction between what I say and actually think. I hope I can say what I think in this class...I've never thought to combine the topics and style of this class with English practice. It's a kind of experiment for me.” At the same time, she notes that she needs English communication for her work.

Another woman wrote,

“I would like to study other idea and culture. I also like English. Moreover I am interesting in American woman's movement ... I like Friday evening very much. Before the class, I often felt lonely. I struggle against conflicts. For example, male society, verbal violence, prejudice, discrimination. I meet many friends in this class. I forget my stress...because we exchange opinions, I get wide knowledge.”

For yet another participant, there is “no connection between English and these topics,” and she seeks merely to combine her interest in women's studies with her need to maintain her fluency in English for her work as a college English instructor.

As the foregoing description indicates, in its goals, structure, approach, topics, and type of participant, the class can be understood as a grass roots example of feminist pedagogy applied to language education (hooks, 1994; McMahonill and Reekie, 1996; McMahonill, 1997; Vandrick, 1994, 1995; Weiler, 1994).

5. Research methods

It is typical in the feminist English classes I have studied to use a reading, poem, song, video or newspaper article dealing with women's issues as a catalyst for language study and discussion (McMahonill & Reekie, 1996; McMahonill, 1997). I chose the following excerpt from a memoir by the Black American feminist writer whose pen name is “bell hooks.”⁶ Students were given the passage a week ahead of time and

asked to prepare their opinions on its theme of mother/daughter relationships.

I am always fighting with mama. Everything has come between us. She no longer stands between me and all that would hurt me. She is hurting me. This is my dream of her – that she will stand between me and all that hurts me, that she will protect me at all cost. It is only a dream. In some way I understand that it has to do with marriage, that to be the wife to the husband she must be willing to sacrifice even her daughters for his good. For the mother it is not simple. She is always torn. She works hard to fulfill his needs, our needs. When they are not the same she must maneuver, manipulate, choose. She has chosen. She has decided in his favor. She is a religious woman. She has been told that a man should obey god, that a woman should obey man, that children should obey their fathers and mothers, particularly their mothers. I will not obey (hooks, 1996, p. 81).

I use separate audio and video recordings, transcribed and triangulated with written and spoken comments by class coordinators and participants as a basis for analysis of the classroom discourse of the subsequent discussion. I also draw on participants' journal entries from the first three months of the class, and their responses to a questionnaire I gave them just prior to the class studied here.

Because of the lack of previous research, I have been forced to borrow from various theoretical disciplines in order to describe and explain the all-female discourse in this “feminist” English as a Second Language classroom. First, I have found certain key concepts of an interactional sociolinguistic approach developed by Goffman (1981), Gumperz (1982), and Schiffrin (1994) to be extremely useful. Within this approach, discourse is viewed as an interaction within which identities and relationships are constantly being constructed, and whose meaning can only be interpreted using contextual cues. Contextual cues refer to the parameters or participation framework of the specific interaction, the institutional setting, and background factors such as culture and ideology.

In the case of the Colors of English class, I take such contextual cues to be the individual situations of the

away,” and notes that one in three marriages now ends in divorce, and that the majority of divorces are now initiated by women. Factors such as women's increasing economic independence and the lessening of social stigma are also noted. What is missing are the conversations between women, mothers and daughters, colleagues and friends, that word by word map out a new culture. It is this new culture which validates women for seeking fulfillment in the public sphere rather than through traditional roles within the family.

Even less recognized is the international nature of women's social change and discourse, as Japanese-speaking¹ women appropriate English as a lingua franca for taking part in international lobbying, conferences, and research. The interest Japanese-speaking women have in acquiring English is reflected not only in the large numbers of women students in university English departments and conversation schools, but in the emergence of grassroots feminist English classes across Japan (McMahill and Reekie, 1996; McMahon, 1997). Such women may ironically find themselves forced to use English itself as a tool for resisting their marginalization as non-native English-speaking women of color in international discourse (Fairclough, 1992; Peirce, 1986; Peirce, 1995).

In an attempt to document the use of English in a cross-cultural context by Japanese-speaking women, this paper examines the discourse of an English discussion class called “Colors of English” for adult Japanese and Japan-born Korean women learners in the Tokyo area.

First, I describe the site, coordinators, facilitators, participants, and my research methods. Then, I use excerpts from the class discussion to analyze how the participants deconstruct and pose alternatives to certain social identities of mother and daughter within the patriarchal family. Finally, in the conclusion I touch upon additional questions raised by this study about English and the linguistic and social identities of the participants and facilitators.

Overview of this research

1. The site

The class termed “Colors of English” started in 1996 and is organized by a women's counseling service and publishing house called Femix. It is held weekly in a meeting room in a women's center in Tokyo. About 40 women have attended it in total over the years; an average of 15 women register per term. I have been co-facilitating this particular class for two years, seeing students an average of once every one to two months. In this study I undertake an in-depth analysis of a

single specific class I facilitated on November 28, 1997.

The class is billed as a “feminist” English class. The first flier explained the class goals as follows: “Why English? Why does English have the power of an international language, and why do we have to learn it? For women who don't want to simply imitate White middle-class English, but who wish to use English as a means for expressing and liberating yourselves, as a common language for sharing your thoughts and encountering women of all races and ethnicities...this Fall, Femix will launch a feminist English class aimed at your empowerment.”

2. The coordinators

“Colors of English” is run by two coordinators. One, the director of Femix, handles the class logistics and publicity. She is Japanese and draws on English books and articles on feminist therapy, psychology, and education as resources for her work both as a counselor and as a publisher of the magazine *Kurashi to kyoiku o tsunagu We*². She explains why she started the class: “I now has a strong feeling that learning English can be a great weapon for Japanese women to get assertiveness. As we Japanese are not encouraged to express ourselves, especially our feelings, we need a sort of training to be articulate and assertive, which I think are most vital issues for a Japanese feminism.”³

The other coordinator handles the recruitment of instructors and curriculum coordination of the class. A Japanese-English translator and student of women's studies and linguistics, she is a Japan-born Korean who has participated in feminist NGO activities on an international level. As she has stated in response to a questionnaire, “To continue thinking about world issues from three different perspectives – race, gender, and class – is very important to me.” She therefore asks English-speaking women of various ethnic backgrounds and nationalities to take turns facilitating the classes once a month, or as one-time guest speakers.

3. The facilitators

Conscious preference is thus given to women of color in order to challenge the widespread linking of English to “white” ethnicity (Norton, 1997). Past instructors have included women of African, Asian, and European descent. Currently, one regular instructor is an Asian-American, one a Japanese, one a white Canadian, and one, myself, a white American. In terms of linguistic diversity, almost all of the regular facilitators have been native speakers of standard North